

Toward a Libertarian Strategy for Academic Change: The Movement Building of Peter Boettke

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Abstract

Murray Rothbard (1977) maintained that libertarian social change requires a libertarian cadre both committed to principle and willing to engage others to help advance the cause. This article applies this theory to academia and highlights the contribution of a professor who best exemplifies what can be classified as the centrist or movement-building approach to libertarian academic change, Peter Boettke. This article focuses on Peter Boettke's efforts to increase the number of academics advancing liberty and then highlights some of his contributions.

JEL Codes: B31, B25, A13

Keywords: Social change; Academic strategy; Investment in education

I. Introduction

How does one bring free society about? Rothbard (1978) wrote, "Libertarians have given considerable thought to refining their basic principles and their vision of a libertarian society. But they have given virtually no thought to a vitally important question, that of strategy: Now that we know the nature of our social goal, how in the world do we get there?" A high percentage of academics believe that one of the most important factors for social change is education,¹ yet how libertarian education is best advanced is debated. Some people are quick to abandon their principles to advance in academia, whereas others stick to their principles but give up on academia. The common

* The author thanks Christopher Coyne, Peter Leeson, and Benjamin Powell for helpful comments and suggestions.

¹ For example, Mises (1998a, p.885) writes, "The body of economic knowledge is an essential element in the structure of human civilization; it is the foundation upon which modern industrialism and all the moral, intellectual, technological, and therapeutical achievements of the last centuries have been built." See also Rothbard (1975), Hummel (2001), Caplan and Stringham (2005), and Stringham and Hummel (forthcoming).

belief is that one must choose one or the other, but a third approach recommends both sticking to one's principles *and* fighting to win in academia.

Following Rothbard's taxonomy from his 1977 manuscript, *Towards a Libertarian Strategy for Social Change*, I will present three approaches for a "Libertarian Strategy for *Academic* Change."² Rothbard described what he called right-wing opportunist, left sectarian, and centrist or movement-building approaches to libertarian social change. In this essay I will apply these three categories toward theories of advancing libertarian ideas in academia. To Rothbard right-wing opportunists include those willing to sell out their principles to get ahead, and left sectarians include those who essentially refuse to engage others. Finally, Rothbard described what he called the centrist approach to libertarian social change, which is committed to principle and willing to engage others to bring changes about. Rothbard said that libertarian social change requires a committed libertarian cadre of people who devote their lives to advancing liberty and helping others join the cause. The libertarian centrist must neither give up engaging others nor sell out his ideals.³

This article highlights how one can use this three-part classification to describe theories of change in academia. The right-wing opportunists are the people who might believe in libertarian ideals but never reveal that fact, and instead spend their careers advancing themselves academically. They become what James Buchanan would refer to as ideological eunuchs.⁴ Or, even worse, in many cases these "classical liberals" actually spend time writing articles that advocate the state. At the opposite end of the spectrum are left sectarians who are unwilling to engage the academic profession. They give up on academia rather than attempt to change

² Rothbard's manuscript *Towards a Libertarian Strategy for Social Change* was unpublished and intended for reading by a few libertarians rather than larger circulation as an outreach document. A much shorter version for general circulation was published as "Strategies For A Libertarian Victory" in 1978.

For the record, I do not endorse the optimism Rothbard had for the Libertarian Party at that time, but I do think that the book describes the different approaches among today's libertarians and academics.

³ To Rothbard this is "The sane anarchist middle!"

⁴ Buchanan (1985, pp.14-15) wrote, "Their interest is not normative; they seem to be ideological eunuchs. Their interest lies in the purely intellectual properties of the models which they work, and they seem to get their kicks from the discovery of proofs of propositions relevant only to their own fantasy lands."

it. Finally, the centrist approach to libertarian academic change is to stay committed to principle *and* try to advance those ideas in academia. The academic members of the libertarian cadre must devote their lives to advancing liberty as well as to assisting other libertarians in advancing the cause in academia.

This article highlights the contribution of a professor who best personifies the centrist approach to libertarian academic change. Peter Boettke can be classified as a centrist in his personal academic achievements and a centrist in how he advises students and guides them to advance in academia. He neither advocates selling out nor giving up on the profession. Instead, Boettke argues that people committed to liberty must work that much harder to win the battle of ideas in academia.

The article proceeds as follows. Section II describes Rothbard's libertarian strategy for social change and applies the theory to academic change. Section III discusses Boettke's approach to libertarian academic change and some results. Section IV concludes. Boettke's approach should be considered a model for anyone who is committed to advancing liberty through academia.

II. Applying Rothbard's Theory of Libertarian Social Change to Libertarian Academic Change

Rothbard classified three types of classical liberals, and this classification can easily be applied to academia. First he described right-wing opportunists. Rothbard (1978) wrote, "Right-wing opportunists openly believe in hiding or working against their ultimate goal in order to achieve short run gains." In academia, right-wing opportunists encompass those who pursue a strategy of careerism even if that includes hiding or publicly denouncing libertarian beliefs. Next he described the left sectarians. Rothbard (1978) wrote:

The left sectarian, in brief, considers *any* transition demands, any use of strategic intelligence to determine priorities for agitation, any appeal to one's audience without sacrificing ultimate principles, in themselves a 'sellout' or betrayal of radical principles.

In academia, left sectarians reject appealing to one's audience and in many ways give up trying to convince others.⁵ In rejecting the strategy of the right-wing opportunists, the left sectarians basically give up trying to advance in academia. Under this worldview, it would be better to work in a rock quarry than to spend effort attempting to engage others. Rothbard writes, "In the libertarian movement, sectarians will simply reiterate such formulas as the nonaggression axiom, or A is A, or the need for self-esteem, without grappling with detailed issues."

Rothbard believed that both right-wing opportunist and left sectarian approaches were flawed:

In sum, *both* strategic deviations are fatal to the proper goal of the victory of liberty as soon as it can be achieved; left-sectarianism because it in effect abandons *victory*, and right-opportunism because it in effect abandons *liberty*.

Finally, Rothbard then described what he called a centrist approach for libertarian change: a commitment to the hardcore libertarian vision and a willingness to engage the world to persuade enough people to help bring that vision about. Rothbard explains:

The centrist position, in contrast, is to begin agitation around currently important issues, examine them, show the public that the cause of these problems is statism and that the solution is liberty, and *then* try to widen the consciousness of one's listeners to show that all current and even remote problems have the same political cause.

To Rothbard the libertarian centrist must work to engage others to make positive changes for liberty. This strategy can be important whether libertarians are achieving success on just a few or many margins.

⁵ I once discovered that a professor of mine discovered anarchist libertarian ideals mid-career, and he told me that it almost led him to quit being a professor because he considered it immoral to teach mainstream economics material. But rather than passing on his new-found libertarian ideas to students and the public through teaching and writing, the professor decided to keep his views silent and teach courses such as Mathematics for Economists that contained no political economic content.

Rothbard argued that the libertarian centrist should work to get others involved in the cause. He referred to the most committed libertarians as the libertarian cadre, and he believed that this cadre can expand. Rothbard wrote, “It is to be hoped that the cadre begins as a tiny few and then grows in quantity and impact.” Rothbard describes the most committed libertarians as being at the top of a pyramid with the goal of bringing in new people to join the movement. He writes, “The major task of the cadre, then, is to try to get as many people as high up the pyramid as possible.” Notice that this centrist strategy can be applicable whether there are a few people in the movement or many.

Left sectarian	Centrist approach	Right-wing opportunist
Stick to principle Abandon victory	Stick to principle Pursue victory	Abandon principle Pursue victory

Figure 1: Approaches to libertarian academic change

There are many parallels to these descriptions in academia (Figure 1). In contrast to the right-wing opportunists, the libertarian centrist eschews career advancement for career advancement’s sake. To the centrist, the point of encouraging libertarians to enter academia is so they can advance libertarianism through research, teaching, or both. If a “libertarian” political economist’s research and teaching has little connection with or is against libertarianism, there is no point from a libertarian point of view.⁶ In contrast to the right-wing opportunist, the centrist believes that career advancement must not come at the expense of libertarianism.⁷ In contrast to the left sectarians, the libertarian centrist does not believe in giving up on victory in academia. The libertarian centrist also does not believe in becoming an academic recluse unwilling to engage others.

By choosing not to advance libertarian thought in academia, both left sectarians and the right-wing opportunists give up on this

⁶ Of course a scientist who happens to be a libertarian can make valuable scientific discoveries, but his contributions would be to science rather than to helping bring about a free world.

⁷ Interestingly, a centrist is always likely to be criticized by right-wing opportunists and by left sectarians. The left sectarian will think that the centrist is too concerned about career advancement, whereas the right-wing opportunist will think that the centrist is too radical and not concerned about career advancement.

important source of outreach. The centrist approach recognizes that libertarian victories are more likely to be achieved the greater the number of libertarians. The libertarian academic cadre has the ability bring in new students and to get them more involved. The libertarian centrist recognizes the importance of academia and works hard to try to advance libertarian ideas within it.

III. Peter Boettke's Movement Building for Libertarian Academic Change

Boettke excellently personifies what can be considered the centrist or movement-building approach to libertarian academic change. Although much could be written on his academic achievements,⁸ this article focuses on his movement building approach to helping students succeed and how his approach differs from others. Some right-wing opportunist academic groups are interested in assisting students regardless of whether they will contribute anything toward libertarian thought.⁹ Boettke, in contrast, would never rank career advancement over libertarian advancement. Boettke wants to help libertarian students succeed, but the point of them succeeding is to advance libertarianism. He would never instruct students to work on projects contrary to their interests in libertarianism or Austrian economics. At the other end of the spectrum, many left sectarians are so dismayed with the profession that they think trying to advance libertarian thought in academia is pointless. In contrast, Boettke states, "For our whole lives we need to be trying to win the scientific battle." Boettke agrees that much of the

⁸ Boettke has a long curriculum vita, and his speaking invitations and publications in various places indicate that Boettke works hard to advance libertarian ideas in many areas. From being invited to be a visiting fellow at Stanford or the London School of Economics to publishing in economics journals across the spectrum, Boettke is always working to find new potential audiences for the libertarian ideas. Boettke is author or editor of more than a dozen books and author of more than 120 journal articles and book chapters that are targeted to both libertarian and non-libertarian readers. Introducing libertarian ideas in new forums is part of Boettke's centrist approach.

⁹ For example, some people seem more concerned with publishing newsletters containing statistics about how many students they "helped" place in academia than actually advancing libertarian students. Of course, the easiest way to fulfill this objective is to give fellowships to mainstream people who would have been fine without the money, such as people at top programs who already have funding, and then claim that one was instrumental in helping them get jobs.

economics profession has been corrupted (Boettke, 1997), but rather than concluding that trying to get ahead is pointless, he says, “We must try that much harder.” Even if some people in the economics profession discriminate against libertarians or Austrians, Boettke advises that we must raise our level of scholarship to try to overcome this discrimination.¹⁰

When a student shows interest in Austrian economics and liberty, Boettke will go out of his way to work with that student to help them succeed. Just as Rothbard recognized the need for libertarians to advance liberty on different margins, Boettke is supportive of students working to advance liberty in many different fields from economics and philosophy to applied political economy. One of Boettke’s best characteristics is figuring out students’ interests and teaching them how to pursue them. Rather than telling students to work on what he is interested in, thus abandoning their interests, or to give up trying to spread the word, Boettke works with students so they can pursue their passion. He teaches people how to take their ideas and think about presenting them in ways that are more likely to be convincing. Boettke states, “The goal is to advance our arguments on our own terms.”

Some examples of what he does will be useful. I was fortunate to enroll at George Mason University the same semester Boettke became a professor there in 1998.¹¹ From day one he treated me with interest and respect. I was a student of Walter Block’s and very interested in the writings of Murray Rothbard. Although Boettke is a more vocal admirer of Israel Kirzner than Rothbard,¹² Boettke took my ideas seriously and constantly engaged me. A highlight of graduate school was getting in dozens upon dozens of fun, spirited

¹⁰ Relaying stories from some of his professors during the 1980s, such as Richard Fink, Pete says, “Our goal is not just to get a seat on the bus. Our goal is to take over the bus. Our goal is not just to sit in the back of the classroom and make a small point. Our goal is to be running the classroom.”

¹¹ In fact, in Spring 1998 I finalized my decision to go to George Mason University the moment I learned that they were about to hire Boettke.

¹² Boettke prefers what he calls “Kirzner’s approach to paring an apple with a peeler compared to Rothbard’s approach to smashing an apple with a sledgehammer.” When it comes to the state, I much prefer the latter! But on certain questions, such as the ultimate role of the state, Boettke is actually closer to Rothbard than Kirzner. To read some of his commentaries on Rothbard, see Boettke (1988) and Boettke and Coyne (2004).

debates with Pete.¹³ He later told me that he would sometimes make arguments that he didn't agree with so that I could make my own arguments stronger. "This is not supposed to be the nodding heads society," he would state. Boettke also catered his courses to his students and made them interactive discussions and debates. They were not canned lectures but spirited and fun. In addition to the time he spent in class, Boettke spent countless hours outside of class talking with me and giving me feedback on my ideas and papers. I know of no other advisor who spends that much time with his students.¹⁴

Like a true other-regarding Robbinsian economist (Robbins, 1932), Pete would take my goals as given and work with me to maximize my success.¹⁵ "Do you really want to write about anarchism?...Okay, let's figure out ways for you to make your argument in the strongest possible way." Pete encouraged me to write in such a way that a reasonable skeptic could be convinced. This is very much in line with Rothbard's (1978) recommendation to "appeal to one's audience." An argument that could be stated as "I believe private law enforcement can work and let me tell you why" can also be stated as "There are two hypotheses: Private law enforcement cannot work versus private law enforcement cannot work, and let's look to theory or evidence." Because the vast majority of economists are used to seeing things presented in a certain style, they will be more willing to entertain a very radical idea if it is presented in a familiar way. The ideas are still radical; only their style of presentation is different. Notice how this approach is neither left sectarian nor right-wing opportunist. A left sectarian might argue that it's selling out to advance anarchist ideas in ways that mainstream

¹³ Even more fun was golfing with Pete and making bombastic remarks a few minutes before Pete was about to make his shot. It was such a joy watching Pete get riled up and inevitably slice the ball into the woods. Pete never held it against me if we would disagree on a topic, although I did notice him getting angry when he would lose in golf!

¹⁴ I have so many good memories of being Boettke's teaching assistant in Prague in 2000 and 2001.

¹⁵ Pete is head and shoulders above most economists, who take the view that students should only do projects that benefit the professor. The world would be a much better place for students if even a fraction of professors became more like Pete.

economists could buy. The right-wing opportunist never would have mentioned the idea of anarchism to begin with.

Pete always encouraged me to “Pursue your interests with passion” and influenced me think about them so that I could publish in both libertarian and mainstream journals. Where the right-wing opportunist would have encouraged (or demanded) that I write about something non-libertarian and the left sectarian would not have encouraged me to write at all, Boettke, the centrist, helped me make the arguments that I wanted to make. Boettke was a valuable resource throughout graduate school and was instrumental in getting me a platform on which to write and teach more.¹⁶ He has done so much for me that I feel grateful, honored, and thrilled to have been able to study under Boettke.

Boettke has mentored other students in much the same way. To date Boettke has chaired the dissertations of approximately a dozen students, and as of 2010 all but a couple are in tenure track positions. To the extent that Boettke’s students are influenced by him (and they are), much of Boettke’s ideas and approach to teaching will emerge as his students enter the classroom.¹⁷ A new group of students will thus have indirect Boettke influence. If those professors teach just four 25-student classes per year, they reach 100 students per year or 1,000 students per decade, and over the next 10 years roughly 10,000 additional students will have classes from Boettke students. As more of those students go on to graduate school and become professors themselves, the influence is multiplied.¹⁸ As such, investment in his doctoral students is highly leveraged. This advances movement building. “Imagine if there were not just one of you but twenty of you,” Boettke states, “The world doesn’t just need one Milton Friedman; the world needs 1,000 Milton Friedmans.”¹⁹

¹⁶ I was Pete’s first test case, and when I went on the academic job market was humbled to end up receiving the most interviews of any student in the history of the economics program at George Mason University.

¹⁷ It is difficult not to be influenced by Boettke’s enthusiasm as a professor. In his classes one can tell that Boettke really enjoys what he is doing. By presenting libertarian ideas in such a positive manner, Boettke is able to get many people to listen and engage his arguments, and I try to emulate this as a professor.

¹⁸ In eight years as a professor, I have sent one dozen of my students on to doctoral programs.

¹⁹ Boettke does have a weakness for Milton Friedman, so in the words of one eminent Czech economist, “Peter Boettke is no Walter Block!”

In addition to increasing the number of people teaching the ideas of Mises, Hayek, and Rothbard in the classroom, Boettke has enabled many people to devote their professional lives to writing about Austrian and libertarian ideas. As of 2010, his four most prolific students²⁰ have authored a total of 2,874 pages of writing in 161 publications (books aside),²¹ and they have authored or edited 8 books in just a few years (Stringham, 2005; Boettke and Leeson, 2006; Stringham, 2007; Powell, 2008; Coyne, 2008; Leeson, 2009; Coyne and Leeson, 2009; Holcombe and Powell, 2009). I posit that these contributions would not be nearly so many or even possible had we not had the training, support, and academic jobs that ensued because of Boettke.²² Boettke clearly is a movement builder working for libertarian victory in academia.

IV. Conclusion

Advancement to a libertarian society almost definitely requires persuading enough people to support it. Large-scale education is of utmost importance, and one of the most important platforms, perhaps the most important platform, is through advancement of libertarian ideas in academia. Imagine hundreds or thousands of professors writing and teaching about the benefits and morality of a free society. Imagine thousands or millions of students and people in the general public learning about the benefits and morality of a free society.

Peter Boettke exemplifies the movement-building approach to libertarian academic change. He works hard to advance libertarian ideas and to help new libertarian professors to win the battle of ideas in academia. In contrast to right-wing opportunists who lose sight of goal and left sectarians who choose not to fight, Boettke is constantly working to win the academic battle for liberty. The foundations that

²⁰ Listed in order of good looks: (1) Edward Stringham, (2) Christopher Coyne, (2) Peter Leeson, and (4) Benjamin Powell.

²¹ 2,339 pages in 135 publications if one divides articles coauthored with each other by the number of coauthors. All of these numbers do not include forthcoming articles or any publications listed on vitas that do not include page numbers.

²² To corroborate Boettke's contribution, my college professor Walter Block reports that nearly all of his students who have studied under Boettke are now in (or on their way to) academic positions, versus almost none of his students who studied in graduate school elsewhere (personal correspondence, January 13, 2010).

this movement-builder has built will have long-lasting and potentially world-changing consequences.

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